
Government of the District of Columbia



**Office of the Deputy Mayor for
Children, Youth, Families and Elders**

Committee on Government Reform
United States House of Representatives

The Honorable Tom Davis, Chairman

***Status of the District Columbia's
Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities
Administration***

Testimony of
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District of Columbia

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2154 Rayburn House Office Building
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Good morning Chairman Davis and members of the Committee on Government Reform. I am Brenda Donald Walker, Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth, Families and Elders for the District of Columbia. I am here today, on behalf of Mayor Williams, to give you an update on the status of the District's Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Administration (MRDDA).

Prior to being appointed Deputy Mayor in November 2005, I was the Director of the District's Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). I was recruited to CFSA as the Chief of Staff to help guide that agency through major reforms and transition out of court-imposed receivership. By virtue of a tremendous amount of work, fiscal responsibility, innovative practices and a solid management team, we were able to create what is now a highly regarded child welfare agency. I offer this history because the challenges facing MRDDA today resemble very much the issues facing CFSA when I started there five years ago.

As you know, MRDDA faces formidable challenges – including budget, management, and service delivery. We have had, literally, decades of decay at MRDDA. Yet, I come before you today, to testify that I believe we are finally on the right track. As with our accomplishments at CFSA, MRDDA cannot be transformed in months – but rather over several years. However, the critical foundation – that upon which substantial reform will be built, can be laid in the next six months.

As you know, the Mayor recently appointed Kathy Sawyer as the new Administrator for MRDDA. Since her retirement as Commissioner for the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, Ms. Sawyer has acted as a consultant for a number of jurisdictions across the country. She has consulted for MRDDA since last October, thus developing a working knowledge of the agency -- so she will hit the ground sprinting when she starts on Monday. In accepting the position, Ms. Sawyer has identified three primary goals for the next six months:

- 1) Positioning MRDDA to effectively operate within its budget;
- 2) Successfully amending the existing Home and Community Based Waiver; and
- 3) Establishing a solid organizational foundation to enable MRDDA to function more efficiently and effectively in its delivery of services.

The coming months will be intense and critical. Everyone who has met Kathy Sawyer comes away impressed with her confidence, experience and commitment to improving the lives of persons with disabilities. I would like to have her brief your staff later this fall after she has had a few months to begin work on executing her goals.

Ms. Sawyer represents only one component of our recent efforts. As I mentioned, a strong management team is essential. We have also added a Chief Operating Officer, Dr. Heather Stowe, who is here with me today. Dr. Stowe has over 20 years of senior management experience in the human services field. We have also recently hired a highly regarded Quality Assurance Manager, a new Director of Programs, and several

other senior staff. Over the last several months we conducted an organizational and staffing analysis of MRDDA. The City Administrator and I will support Ms. Sawyer's rapid implementation of the critical management and organizational changes needed to move the agency forward.

Much of our work at MRDDA since I became Deputy Mayor – and more intensely in the last four months – has been driven by the Systems Improvements Plan that I outlined to address the agency's basic structural deficiencies. This plan has seven major components: 1) expansion of provider capacity; 2) provider monitoring and accountability; 3) contracts management; 4) feasibility of waiver operations; 5) improvement in day programs; 6) case management; and 7) training. Through intensive weekly meetings, which I chair, we are closely tracking our progress, modifying things when necessary, and most importantly, remaining focused.

As you are aware, we also face a significant legal challenge to our stewardship of MRDDA. Counsel for the plaintiffs' class and the United States Department of Justice filed motions for receivership and contempt in the longstanding class action lawsuit *Evans v. Williams*. I am making available, for the Committee's records, copies of the District's oppositions to those motions, as well as my declaration submitted to the court last Monday.

Our work over the last few months, and in the six months ahead is designed to lay the foundation for long term systemic reform. With the commitment of the Mayor, the

support of the City Administrator, and MRDDA's new leadership, we are confident that we can finally get this agency on track. Thank you for the opportunity to update you on our plans for MRDDA. I look forward to your questions.